DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 424 CS 509 957

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TITLE Sitting on the Fence: Improving Quality and Relationships through Internal Consulting.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (84th, New York, NY, November 19-24, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *Consultants; Higher Education; *Professional Services; Training
IDENTIFIERS Academic Community; *Communication Consultants; Communication Strategies

ABSTRACT

One academic internal communication consultant engages a metaphor to describe her role which indicates an unwillingness (or inability) to choose one side over the other: "sitting on the fence." Some of the benefits for engaging in internal consulting are: consulting activities can provide many positive outcomes for professors and students; there is much gratification from seeing the direct results of training and consulting efforts and being involved in facilitating change which impacts daily work; internal consulting forces one to display the utmost degree of competence and boosts the ego; internal consulting reflects positively on the faculty member's department and helps educate more people on campus about communication professionals; committee service with organizational members whom one has trained and/or facilitated is a joy; and one's own subjective experiences of the university guide your approach to consulting/training activities. On the other hand, some of the drawbacks are: the negative side of "insider status" is that one knows the university's weaknesses and can relate directly to the issues; one may experience an increased sense of responsibility and accountability for programs and services which are beyond one's sphere of influence; increased knowledge of internal political issues and interpersonal conflicts can complicate daily interactions; because of heightened confidentiality, ethical issues must be attended to constantly; although keeping a "low profile" concerning paid activities is better, internal consulting projects are highly publicized; and the income generated for internal consulting in educational institutions is usually far less than might be earned for similar services performed for corporate clients. (NKA)

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Sitting on the Fence:

Improving Quality and Relationships through Internal Consulting

Presented at the

Annual Conference of the

National Communication Association

New York, NY

November, 1998

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I'll start with a brief introduction. I am an Assistant Professor of Communication at Southern Connecticut State University entering my fifth year. My core teaching area encompasses Organizational Communication, Small Group Communication, Decision-Making, Training and Development, and a whole host of interpersonally-oriented courses. I enjoy an active role in my department's curriculum, personnel, and search committees and serve on a number of university-wide causes, including University Curriculum Forum and New Student Orientation. I am also UNTENURED!

For over ten years I have enjoyed a consulting practice specializing in implementing team and interpersonal skills training in conjunction with quality improvement systems. My Organization Development and Communication expertise was put to good use for a variety of clients in many industries, including advertising, manufacturing, utilities, and professional groups. Southern Connecticut State University represented my first experience with internal consulting. My primary role was Trainer/Facilitator for two teams implementing university-wide quality efforts. The actual training took place over the summer months of 1997.

In summarizing my experience as an internal communication consultant and trainer for quality initiatives, I have engaged a metaphor often used to describe the role of the consultant: SITTING ON THE FENCE. Aside from the rather uncomfortable posture one might assume while straddling a picket fence, this metaphor also indicates an unwillingness (or inability) to choose one side over the other. At this time, I am no longer sitting on the fence, but requests for further training have already pointed me back in the direction of that sometimes uncomfortable spot.

It should be noted that, as I list the impelling and constraining factors that I have experienced in relation to internal consulting, my perspective may be different than yours. What I perceive as "positive" at this point my life and in my career progression might not be viewed similarly by you. I invite you to tally your own plusses and minuses as I share my list with you. First, I will list some of the benefits, the impelling forces for engaging in internal consulting, from my perspective. Then I will list some of the drawbacks, or the forces constraining internal consulting activities, from my perspective.

BENEFITS:

+ Consulting activities can provide many positive outcomes for professors and their students. Enhanced professional competence, research and internship opportunities, and applied knowledge available to share with students are among the many benefits. Teaching courses in Communication Training and Development or Communication Consulting presumes a thorough grounding and applied experience in a variety of organizational contexts. Courses such as Small Group Communication or Organizational Communication are enriched with specific (though well disguised) examples of organizational issues and scenarios highlighting effective or ineffective communication. Indeed, few Communication courses are not enhanced with real-life narratives illustrating the theory or skill being discussed in class.

+ There is great sense of gratification from seeing the direct results of training and consulting efforts and being involved in facilitating change which will directly or indirectly impact your own daily work positively.

+ Internal consulting forces you to put your best foot forward and display your utmost degrees of competence and professionalism. This pushes Continuous Quality Improvement in your own practice to new heights.

+ There is a personal ego boost stemming from being valued within your own organization. Being selected as an internal resource represents a vote of confidence in one's background and abilities. The high visibility associated with a training or consulting job well done can bring accolades to us, as faculty members, and to our department.

+ Internal consulting reflects positively on the faculty member's department and helps to educate more people on campus about the types of theories and skills informing Communication professors' work. (This can be particularly true in a university which has not always publicly acknowledged the value of Communication professionals and their contributions.)

+ Word of a job well done travels quickly. Internal consultants and trainers may be asked to facilitate meetings for other groups and committees or they may be approached to serve as an internal trainer in areas related to Communication. This added exposure is a real plus for faculty working towards tenure.

+ Your own relationships with professionals and colleagues across campus can be enhanced by working with a variety of people on campus. You have the opportunity to meet other university departments, disciplines, and service providers who are student-centered and are pro-quality. Your network enlarges so that you can refer students to the appropriate people. Friendships across professions and across disciplines can be formed.

+ Committee service with organizational members who you have personally trained and/or facilitated is a joy. You can see first hand the positive changes in people's work styles and interpersonal skills. Your meetings run more effectively, thus providing you with higher satisfaction with group outcomes.

+ Your own subjective experiences of the university guide your approach to your consulting and training activities. On the positive side, because you know the organization, you are aware of its strengths, can directly relate to participants' daily work issues, and can empathize with employees about common problems, and know people involved in many aspects of expediting phases of the projects.

DRAWBACKS:

- On the negative side of "insider status," you know the weaknesses of the organization, can directly relate to the issues, can empathize with employees about common problems, and know the people who are SUPPOSED to be expediting the projects. This can lead to frustrating moments.

- You may experience an increased sense of responsibility and accountability for programs and services which are beyond your sphere of influence. For example, while you have some input regarding scheduling and timing, overall strategy, and participation issues, some factors decided by administration may hinder quality goals. You must work hard to make the best out of the situation and environment.

- Increased knowledge of internal political issues and interpersonal conflicts can complicate daily interactions. What did you know (or think you knew) prior to the consulting assignment and what did you learn (or think you learned) as a result of the consulting activities? There is an enhanced sensitivity to confidentiality on your part, yet trust issues can be more difficult to assess. For example, trainees (other faculty and lower-level administrators and support staff) trust you more, while some higher level administrators trust you less.

- Due to the heightened degree of confidentiality, ethical issues must be attended to constantly. For traditionally open people who enjoy talking about the status of the university, practicing polite evasiveness with colleagues (especially those who are very interested in issues faced during consulting activities) can be difficult. There is an urge to offer less information, even though you are now "in the know."

- The referral process adds an interesting twist. Along with the referral to the state or system-wide level of the organization many of the above issues become heightened in intensity and importance. There is more of a need to express competence and professionalism, check your own perspectives, ensure confidentiality, establish rapport and trust, and resist talking with colleagues about their views.

- Internal consultants and trainers may be approached for related work by members of other academic or administrative units. These client contacts may be difficult to turn down due to previously established relationships.

- There can be nagging doubts since the overall reception of Quality Processes within university systems is not initially positive. Does your Department Chair or Dean REALLY support quality initiatives? Why do some faculty sneer when students are referred to as customers or clients? Are you attached to something that is valued or something that is avoided?

- While my typical stance is to keep a "low profile" concerning paid activities performed during winter and summer breaks or in other "free time" areas, internal consulting projects are highly publicized. Thus, colleagues are well aware of your consulting activities. Not all faculty (or even Communication colleagues) react favorably to consulting activities. In

particular, overt or covert resentment on the part of colleagues regarding income can become an issue. ("Hey, I'd like to make that kind of money!")

- Income generated while in the service of one's own university is also a core issue surrounding renewal, promotion, and tenure issues. Does the work become tainted, less important, or less valued because it was paid for? Does it count as university service if one is paid to do it?

- Finally, although internal consulting can be (and should be) a paid endeavor, the income generated while serving clients in educational institutions tends to be far less than one might earn for similar services performed for industrial or corporate clients.

I hope that I have identified some of the pointiest of the issues comprising the fence that internal consultants may sit upon. I encourage you to consider this position for yourself based upon your organization, your professional strengths, and your motives. If given another opportunity to serve as an internal consultant or trainer helping my university to meet its quality objectives, I would gingerly approach that fence again. The next time, though, I would be armed with enough knowledge to bring a pillow to soften the "points" and round out the harsh edges.